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SUBJECT: CHILE'S CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS: CENTER-LEFT
CONCERTACION COALITION WINS WORKING MAJORITY IN CONGRESS

REF: SANTIAGO 2486 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: For the first time since democracy returned to Chile in 1989, the center-left governing Concertacion coalition has secured a working majority in both houses of Congress as a result of the congressional elections on December 11. When the new Senate takes office in March 2006, Concertacion will hold 20 seats and the center-right Alianza opposition 17 (there will be one independent). Ten seats held by senators-by-appointment are to be eliminated effective March 2006, reducing the total number of senators to 38. Concertacion's working majority in the Chamber of Deputies is slightly larger than in the Senate (65-54; one independent). The far left coalition, including a small communist party, once again failed to gain a seat in either chamber. End summary.

Concertacion Wins Working Majority in Both Houses

¶2. (U) Along with the first round of the presidential elections (ref a), Chileans elected half of their senators and all of their deputies on December 11. The result: the center-left ruling Concertacion coalition emerged with a working majority in both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. Of the 20 Senate races, Concertacion won 11, the center-right Alianza opposition won 8, and an independent took one seat. Some of the more prominent senators elected were former Foreign Minister Soledad Alvear, former UDI head Pablo Longueira, former president Eduardo Frei, and Juan Pablo Letelier. In the Chamber of Deputies (where all 120 seats were up for re-election), Concertacion won 65 seats, the Alianza won 54, and an independent took one seat.

¶3. (U) While the absolute number of Concertacion senators remains unchanged from the congressional elections in 2001, Concertacion's composition has shifted leftward: the centrist Christian Democrat party lost half of its seats, while the Socialist Party and the Socialist Radical Democratic Party each increased their representation. Within the Alianza coalition, the Independent Democratic Union (UDI) party dropped from 11 to 9 seats, while the National Renewal party increased from 8 to 9 seats.

¶4. (U) Below is the composition in the Senate and Chamber of

Deputies when Congress takes office on March 11, 2006:

SENATE (38)

Concertacion (20)

-- Socialist Party (8)
-- Christian Democrat Party (6)
-- Radical Social Democrat Party (3)
-- Party for Democracy (3)

Alianza (17)

-- Independent Democratic Union (9)
-- National Renewal (8)

Independent (1)

CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES (120)

Concertacion (65)

-- Socialist Party (15)
-- Christian Democrat Party (21)
-- Radical Social Democrat Party (7)
-- Party for Democracy (22)

Alianza (54)

-- Independent Democratic Union (34)
-- National Renewal (20)

Independent (1)

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Comment

¶5. (SBU) The results of the congressional elections may affect the presidential run-off election on January 15. Concertacion's "victory" (a majority in both houses) may unite the four Concertacion parties behind Bachelet and prevent defections or abstentions from the center Christian Democrats, something absolutely necessary if voters on the right unite behind Sebastian Pinera. On the other hand, there are some indications that centrist voters -- who might otherwise vote for Bachelet -- may be uneasy with Concertacion's congressional shift to the left, and might instead vote for Pinera to provide a "check" on Concertacion power.

¶6. (SBU) The Christian Democrats' poor showing in the congressional elections could easily re-ignite the perennial issue of the future of the Concertacion coalition, as the Christian Democrats suffer an identity crisis. If Pinera loses to Bachelet, it is likely the same issue will rise within the Alianza. If the coalitions fail, it is likely Chile's binomial electoral system would have to be revised, as well.

KELLY